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Actor Heston's Fiery Telephone Pitch Enlists Support to Save Vietnam POWs

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Nearly 10,000 Americans in recent weeks have heard a fiery telephone sales pitch by actor Charlton Heston, enlisting support for a project to bring back U.S. prisoners of war who he says are still being held in Vietnam and Laos.

Mr. Heston is seeking to raise money for Skyhook II, a lobbying effort to build support for the POW issue. The project's organizers hope public outcry will pressure Washington into taking some action.

Based on evidence that the U.S. has compiled over the years, it "defies logic" not to believe that Vietnam and Laos still hold U.S. prisoners, Mr. Heston said.

About 2,500 U.S. servicemen and civilians are still listed as missing in action in Southeast Asia, and Vietnamese refugees have reported seeing American POWs. Although many of those accounts have been discredited by U.S. officials, the Defense Department says it is evaluating 176 unresolved sightings of U.S. POWs by refugees and other supposed witnesses.

John LeBoutillier, Skyhook II's organizer and a U.S. congressman from 1981 to 1983, wrote in a newspaper article last August that Defense Intelligence Agency analysts privately concede that between 20 and 253 POWs are being held. Mr. LeBoutillier, a Long Island Republican, served on the House Task Force on Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia.

'Highest National Priority'

The White House doesn't officially support Skyhook II, although President Reagan has said that resolving the POW issue has the "highest national priority." The Reagan administration's position is that it can't rule out the presence of U.S. POWs in Indochina and that increased public awareness is important to resolving the issue.

But a White House spokesman said the POW issue is too controversial for the administration to endorse a public fund-raising effort, and that Skyhook II can't be supported because it isn't "in coordination with the U.S. government."

Mr. Heston said administrations of both parties "have chosen to ignore" the POW issue because "it's embarrassing (and) destructive to international relations." In short, Mr. Heston said, it has been "too hot an issue" for Washington.

Strong words, but his recorded telephone sales pitch is even stronger. "Many of our men were held behind," he says in the recording. "They're still there to this day. Locked in bamboo cages in the jungle or in caves in the mountains. Some of our men are used as slaves, forced to drag plows in rice paddies. . . . America can't forget these men. We have to bring them home, all of them. . . . They're ours and they're heroes, real heroes."

Robert Pittenger, chairman of Mark I Communications Inc. of Bedford, Texas, the telecommunications concern doing the solicitation, declined to say how much money has been raised so far, but he said that at least one of every five listeners has contributed. Mr. Pittenger said he offered his company's services at a cut rate and intends to keep calling Americans until all the POWs have been returned, no matter how long that takes.

"After 13 years this issue clearly isn't resolved," Mr. LeBoutillier said. "Millions out there care and have never been contacted."

Chance to Be Saved

The Air Force said Skyhook is the name of a communications network that enables pilots in distress to contact experts as the fliers try to correct in-flight problems. Mr. LeBoutillier said the name Skyhook II symbolizes for the POWs a second chance to be saved.

Mr. LeBoutillier said he has lined up an advisory board of celebrities, including baseball figures Willie Mays and Billy Martin; Gloria Vanderbilt. Mr. LeBoutillier's cousin; and retired Army Gen. Daniel O. Graham, who helped develop the "Star Wars" defense concept. Gen. Graham, in a letter to Mr. LeBoutillier, said he believes that "some of our men are still alive and imprisoned," and that "the Skyhook II project is the best approach to recover these men."

Some of the funds raised by Skyhook II will be used to run television advertisements presenting evidence that U.S. prisoners are still held in Southeast Asia. But it is uncertain whether the ads will be aired on the major television networks. Representatives of CBS and NBC strongly suggest that such ads would be too controversial and would contain too strong an advocacy position. ABC said it would have to review such ads before deciding to run them.